

Top agent Boras calls rebuilding teams 'competitive cancer'

By RONALD BLUM
AP Baseball Writer

CARLSBAD, Calif. — The agent for free agent Bryce Harper and many of baseball's top players claims rebuilding teams have become a "competitive cancer" that caused this season's 4 percent attendance drop.

As the sport's officials start to consider possible rules changes to spark offense and speed up play, Scott Boras acridly critiqued several clubs that were among the 17 to draw fewer fans this year than last.

Boras pointed out Louisiana State's baseball team had a higher average attendance for its 37 home games than the Miami Marlins did for their 81 — 10,786 to 10,014.

"The fans of Florida have certainly brought the MIA to Miami," he said Wednesday in a courtyard outside the general managers' meetings.

He claimed when "the divisional clubs come to Minnesota, it's gotten so bad that only one of the Twins shows up."

And he criticized the Toronto Blue Jays, who had the biggest decrease in the major leagues this year, falling by 878,000 fans to 2.33 million.

"They've lost near a third of their fan base due to the blue flu of not bringing attractive players the fans find interesting to their market," he said.

Boras has self-interest in encouraging spending, wanting fewer clubs jettisoning veterans in favor of youth and handing out more lucrative contracts — especially to his clients.

Major League Baseball's average attendance dropped to 28,830, its lowest since 2003 after 14 consecutive seasons topping 30,000, and six ballparks set record lows. Boras connected the drop to non-competitive clubs: There were three 100-loss teams for



In this Sept. 7, 2018, file photo, Washington Nationals' Bryce Harper takes off his batting helmet after he flied out during the first inning of the team's baseball game against the Chicago Cubs in Washington. The Nationals made an offer to Harper late in the season in an attempt to reach a deal before he became a free agent. Nationals General Manager Mike Rizzo disclosed the talks with agent Scott Boras at the general managers' meetings on Tuesday.

the second time since 1985 and the first since a record four in 2002. And there were eight 95-loss teams for the first time in big league history.

"The reality of it is they're losing their fan base, and it costs millions and millions of dollars to rebuild the fan base," he said.

Boras is seeking a record contract for Harper, topping outfielder Giancarlo Stanton's \$325 million, 13-year deal through 2027 reached with the Miami Marlins, who traded him to the New York Yankees last December. Boras sounded as if he had rehearsed his zingers like a stand-up comedian.

"Certainly Harper's bazaar has begun," he said. "It's fashionable. It's historical. It's elite. It's global, certainly. And certainly it has inspirations that deal with great shoes and great hair."

Washington made a late-season offer before

Harper became a free agent at the unusually young age of 26. Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo said Harper didn't respond.

"He's going to go about his business and we're going to go about our business," Rizzo said. "We drafted, signed, developed him. He turned into one of the best players in the league with our uniform on."

While GMs meet with each other and agents, the formal sessions deal with the mechanics of the sport, and Commissioner Rob Manfred and his staff are concerned about the drop in offense and rise in strikeouts. The big league batting average fell seven points to .248, its lowest since 1972 — the last season before the American League adopted the designated hitter.

Strikeouts set a record for the 11th straight year and topped hits for the first time in big league history.

"I think fans like the ball in play a little bit more," Chicago Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein said. "I embrace MLB's efforts to think about how to steer the game towards the most compelling product for the fans. If that involves the ball in play more, then you find some subtle ways to influence that."

Los Angeles Angels general manager Billy Eppler doesn't think alterations are needed.

"I think we should embrace it. I don't think we should fight it," he said. "Why are people striking out more? Probably because pitchers are throwing about 3 1/2 miles an hour harder than they were seven years ago. People are getting better with their breaking ball. There's more technology in the game. And you can really accurately decide where you want to throw a baseball and practice that for particular hitters."



MLB All-Star catcher J.T. Realmuto of the Miami Marlins celebrates with third base coach Fredi Gonzalez after hitting a solo home run off Yomiuri Giants pitcher Ryusei Oe in the fifth inning of their exhibition baseball game at Tokyo Dome in Tokyo on Thursday.

MLB All-Stars beat Japan's Giants ahead of exhibition tour

By JIM ARMSTRONG
AP Sports Writer

TOKYO — J.T. Realmuto and Amed Rosario drove in two runs each to lead the MLB All-Stars over the Yomiuri Giants 9-6 on Thursday in a warm-up game ahead of their six-game exhibition series against Japan's national team.

Juan Soto hit a double off the roof of Tokyo Dome in the third inning that scored Yadier Molina from second to give the MLB team a 4-0 lead. Realmuto then doubled in a run and Rosario added two more on a single as the MLB squad scored five runs in the inning to take a 7-0 lead.

Realmuto also hit an opposite-field solo homer in the fifth to make it 8-3.

After the game, Realmuto got to experience a Japanese baseball tradition when he was invited on the field to take part in the "hero interview" in front of the Tokyo Dome crowd.

"This is awesome, we don't do this in the United

States so I'm really excited to be here with you guys," Realmuto said. "Hopefully, I can keep hitting well and be here with you again."

The highlight for the home fans came in the fourth when Seiya Matsubara's sinking liner split the gap between Ronald Acuna Jr. and Soto in left-center field.

By the time Acuna retrieved the ball and got it back into the infield, Matsubara had raced around the bases for a three-run inside-the-park home run that cut the MLB stars' lead to 7-4.

The series begins Friday with three games on consecutive nights in Tokyo followed by one game in Hiroshima on Tuesday and two games in Nagoya on Wednesday and Thursday.

During the series, pitchers will not be allowed to throw more than 80 pitches per game. If a pitcher throws more than 50 pitches, he must have four days of rest before being able to throw in another game.

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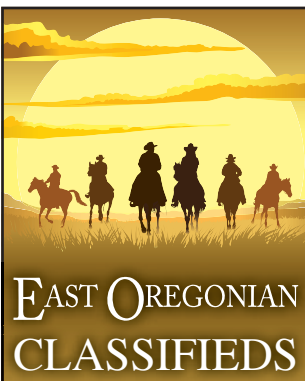
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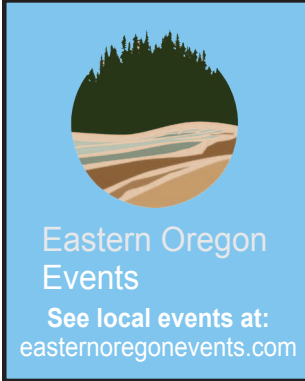
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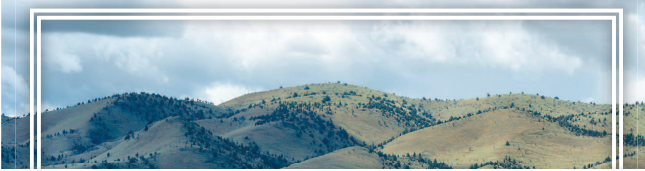
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